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ABSTRACT

The minimum competency movement's rationale can be reduced to four problem-laden propositions: the state through its schools owes every child an education; a high school graduate should be at least minimally competent; schools should be held accountable for seeing to it that every child meets this standard; and to assure this, every child must be tested. The movement has paid insufficient attention to such problems as the possibility that all students from one racial, ethnic, or social class might fail; the possibility that too many students will fail; the difficulty of the schools in specifying what they will guarantee that each student will learn; the possibility that tests will have to be made so elementary that nearly all will pass; and the possibility that some students will drop out to avoid testing while some will pass and still be judged incompetent by employers. In addition, the problem of dealing with resistance by teachers, students, and parents has been ignored. Minimal competency testing is regressive and deadeningly dull, distracting students from confronting important issues. Special problems surrounding the underlying testing include the following: the "grammar" of tests as a medium, regardless of content or purpose, determines the quality of the test and its effects on people; tests rely heavily on math and statistics, putatively exact and immune from criticism; and tests are inadequate and inaccurate as means of predicting success. (DF)

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ASSAULT WITH A DEADLY MANDATE:

THE MINIMUM COMPETENCY MOVEMENT

Allan E. Dittmer

When I was a kid, I naively put little stock in the expression "sticks and stones will break my bones, but names will never hurt me." But living has taught me a much different lesson. Not only are the names we give objects and ideas imbued with awesome power, they also shape our actions and the way we perceive reality. And because we believe our culture and society to be "advanced," failing completely to understand the relative nature of the words advanced, up-to-date, and modern, we have fallen victim to our own intellectual hubris, and abrogated our rights as individuals to the technocrats, experts and politicians who send us off on wild goose chases for solutions to problems which are often the very ones they've created.

It is disturbing enough to see some of the so-called "hard scientists" fall victim to this trap, but to watch those whose business it is to teach human beings the complexity and beauty of language suffer the same delusion is more than one can stand. Now more than ever before, we need resolute individualists in the ranks of our professions; all of our professions, persons with an extra measure of common sense and integrity who are not afraid to follow their instincts about what is right and necessary, and who are willing to invest the time and energy to

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unscramble the meaning of and motives behind what is more often than not foisted off on them. We need people who are willing to take the risk to stand up in the face of strong resistance and fight if necessary for what they believe is right. And this won't be easy considering the number of excuses available that make it so tempting to give in--excuses like the problems will go away, let someone else who has less to lose take the risks, or it's just not that big a deal.

Well, I for one, believe that the minimum competency movement is that big a deal, and that what we do about it now could well affect the course of public education in the years to come.

First, it is essential to understand what some of the problems are with the competency movement. At last count, some thirty-two states were close to or had developed some kind of competency related materials, either tests or lists. Already one state, Florida, has run into some of the serious political problems implicit in this kind of stuff, and has been pressured into declaring a moratorium on their program; and several other states seem to be close to the same situation.

In the mindless rush to develop competency programs and tests, it is hard to believe the perpetrators would ignore such weighty issues as:

What if all the failures fall in one racial, ethnic or social class? From how many students can a school district withhold diplomas?

What will happen when too many fail? Lower the passing score? Make an easier test? Make different "minimums" for

different kids? Teach test taking?

Will schools be willing to specify what they will "guarantee" each student will learn? If not, how can they require a test? If so, how elementary will the test have to be in order that most students can pass?

If the competencies are "Mickey Mouse" so that everyone can pass, won't the schools look foolish?

What will happen when some kids drop out rather than take the test?

What will happen when graduates who pass the test are still not judged competent by potential employers?¹

And how do you deal with teacher, parent and student resistance to your program? Ignore it? Or do you try to explain it by launching into the confused and obfuscating jargon of the professional bureaucrat?

Or look at it from the perspective of Jim Meklenburger, who boils the minimum competency movement down to four points. They are:

1. The state, through its schools, owes every child an education.
2. Therefore, when a child graduates, he should be minimally competent, at the very least.
3. Therefore, schools should be held accountable for seeing to it that every child is minimally competent.
4. To assure that this occurs, we should test every child.

Then he looks at each point separately and the extraordinary number of problematic questions each raises. Point one again:

The state, through its schools, owes every child an education.

1. Only through its schools? Are all the things a child should minimally learn the province of the school? Will the test only cover school-taught things?
2. What is the nature of the state's obligation? Is it the

¹Jim Meklenburger, "Minimum Competency Testing: The Bad Penny Again," Phi Delta Kappan, Vol. 59, No. 10 (June 1978), 699.

rendering of a service that can be defined by student learning? Or is it the provision of certain facilities and opportunities?

3. An education? Is there one kind for all, at minimum? Or are there a variety of education experiences and outcomes that are acceptable?
4. If there is a minimum for every child, is it the same minimum for all children? If for each child, how does one justify different "standards" for different children?
5. Does the state (or the school) know what it is able to do for each child? What will the school guarantee (like the performance contractor of old)? What will the state (or the school) do if it fails to meet its guarantee?

Point two:

When a child graduates, the child should be minimally competent, at the very least.

6. What are competencies? Do they relate to school skills or to real life? Are they the same for all children? Are they dictated by the "mainstream" culture?
7. What is a minimum?
8. Who has the wisdom, the authority, and the bravado to decide what competencies should be applied to all children, and what are the minimums within each? The legislature? State board? State superintendent? Local boards? Local community groups? Subject-matter experts? The federal government? The testing companies? The textbook publishers? Parents? Teachers? Kids?
9. Are there "minimum competencies" evident among the adults in any community? How will the minimum competencies required of children in school relate to the competencies of their parents and neighbors?
10. What are the appropriate tests for competencies? Do we watch what youngsters can accomplish in real-life settings? Do we simulate real-life settings? Or do we follow the tried-and-true path of giving multiple-choice and paper-and-pencil tests?

Point three:

Schools should be held accountable for seeing to it that every child is minimally competent.

11. What is the real purpose: to judge schools or to judge kids? Who is accountable when a student fails to master a competency?
12. Will schools be held accountable, or is this but a new new rationalization for labeling certain children

incapable?

13. Are we confident that, whether we label children competent or not competent, these judgments accurately reflect what a child can do in real life?

And point four:

To assure that this occurs, we should test every child.

14. Is not what a child does in real life both a better test and a more meaningful test than any school-given test?
15. If the purpose is to judge schools, must 100% of the children succeed in order for schools to succeed?
16. If the purpose is to judge schools, is not random sampling sufficient to satisfy the presumed information needs of decision makers?
17. Under what circumstances can a student be exempted from the tests?²

These are forty more unanswered questions than existed when the FDA banned the use of cyclamates or the Senate Select Committee prompted the investigation and subsequent resignation of an American president. And yet the educational establishment rushes headlong into an approach that even its most zealous supporters poorly understand. Why? Haven't we made similar mistakes before? How can we explain our latest bout of tail-chasing? One partial explanation resides in an elegantly brief statement by Loren Barritt. He says:

At the moment, the prime solutions to the difficulties in education all seem to spring from a belief that we lack a sufficient technology of teaching, of learning, and of evaluation. Educators are asked to be accountable for their time, their procedures, their goals, and their outcomes. Better education for children is presumed to follow when narrowly defined goals--that are countable--are specified and then assessed at some appropriate time. It is the assumption of such procedures that poor teaching will be revealed and good teaching made better whenever

²Meklenburger, 698-699.

measurable clarity is introduced into the complex teaching-learning interaction.

The pursuit of control through better technology is likely to continue for the foreseeable future. The fact that teaching and learning are creative acts which call forth new and unforeseeable insights from the human beings involved is, however, likely to frustrate attempts to count in order to understand what is occurring. It is likely that we shall find ourselves with clear and insignificant goals. Such efforts to improve schooling are based upon a mistaken application of scientific procedures to human affairs. The rules of science do not require that we oversimplify the complex in order to understand what has occurred. In fact, it is clear that applying science in this way will only assure misunderstanding. Out of our frustrated desire to make things change in prescribed ways we have leaped to the conclusion that we know enough to control complex human events.³

Another, less philosophical explanation, stems from the fact that people are having a very difficult time coping with the high stress and unsettling pace of contemporary life. They feel that something has been lost and find schools an easy target for blame because of the apparent decline in test scores and school performance almost at the same time that expenditures for education have risen astronomically. As people look around them they find they are helplessly trapped in a rising economic spiral from which there seems no escape. Insurance costs rise, food prices rise, fuel prices rise, automobile prices rise, and generally they conclude that the price they pay for the goods and services they receive far exceeds their value. The solution it seems is to return to the high standards of performance and discipline of a past era.

³Loren S. Barritt, "Some Thoughts On A More Hopeful Future," Innovator (July 1976), 23.

These reasons, some based on real fears, would be noble indeed if they hadn't arisen in such close proximity to a time of extreme social/cultural change and the resultant instability caused by it. In the late 60s and early 70s for the first time in history, young people spoke out against the authority of adults, and the era of "letting it all hang out" had begun. Is it possible that today's children are paying for the sins of their outspoken predecessors who have dissolved into the social scene like a bicarbonate of soda in water? To miss the irony in this possibility would be to miss the absurdity of the whole issue.

For the minimal competency movement with its tests and drills and emphasis on subskills is regressive and deadeningly dull and is forcing children to spend endless hours dealing with trivia, while at the same time keeping them from confronting the difficult issues of their life and times, and in so doing raising their consciousness about them. In other words, competencies are safe. Margot Hentoff has described this social phenomenon as our ". . . institutional Maginot line . . . perfectly equipped to deal with the past."

One dimension of the minimum competency movement without which it seemingly could not get along, is measurement, specifically in the form of tests and test results. Ironically, it is in this area where the movement seems most vulnerable and has drawn the most damaging criticism. The irony of course lies in the fact that testing relies heavily on math and statistics,

disciplines regarded by many as exact and immune from criticism. The subject of testing itself is usually sufficient to intimidate most self-respecting English teachers, if for no other reason than the esoteric language testing people use--validity, norm-referenced/criterion referenced/domain referenced tests, reliability, standard deviation, culture biased vs. culture free norms, stanine and percentile, just to name a few. I suppose one could make a case for why teachers, even humanities teachers, ought to know these terms and their function in evaluation, but for the life of me I don't know why. If we have to know their terms, then they should of course have to know ours, as for example, high mimetic mode, immediate constituent analyses, super segmental phoneme, iambic tetrameter, non-restrictive clause, tagmeme, mythopoetic ballad, and of course, phrase structure/semantic/phonological and deep structure components; terms which most of us would consider cumbersome and find difficult to explain.

Imagine if you will this situation: a teacher standing in front of a class giving the following instructions:

Class, I would like you to clear your desks...pause... take out a piece of paper...pause...there will be no talking or looking at your neighbor while you take this test... pause...number your paper in the left hand margin, skipping every other space--from 1 to 14.

The teacher might add such little tension releasers as:

95 to 100% is an A, below 65% is failing. There will be

no make-up tests. The results will determine who graduates and who doesn't. Write your answers legibly using only a number 2 lead pencil. Now all you have to do is write the correct word in the space I leave blank. I'll only say the item once so listen carefully. You will have only three seconds to answer. "From the _____test _____ of its _____, during _____ly _____ and a _____ of each _____, _____s or _____s, in _____ or _____, the _____ of the _____."

The teacher might continue:

Now class, exchange papers with the person on your right and print your name legibly at the bottom left hand corner of the paper. If you make a mistake in correcting the other person's paper, the points will be deducted from your score.

It's frightening to think that a whole generation of kids has grown up able to say they've shared in this experience. It has such universality and has persisted so long, one might even regard it as a syndrome in American education.

Now what questions does this example raise which apply to the testing issue? First, most of you who read this article are English teachers, and as such you have very likely studied the work from which the test question was taken, the Customhouse chapter of Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter, and yet I could predict with reasonable certainty how all of you would do on this test given the amount of preparation you had. As a

matter of fact, because I controlled the distribution of the content, the manner in which it was distributed, and the construction of the test, I could probably regulate to a degree the outcome of future tests. What it seems to me I can't predict however, is the way the complex blender of your mind will absorb and react to my grand design. In other words, I am suggesting that there is a "grammar" or structure to tests and testing just as there is for other media such as television, movies, radio and newspapers, and that regardless of the contents or purpose of a test, the quality of the experience and its effects on people is determined by this grammar. Considering again the heavy reliance the minimal competency advocates place on tests and testing, they would be well advised to look into what communication and mass media theorists have to say about the structure of media and their impact on people. It could save everyone a lot of grief and pain.

There are two sides at least to the learning process, and although all psychometricians the world over would like to believe they can predict and control the outcomes of instruction with reasonable certainty, the fact remains that because one wishes something to be, that doesn't necessarily make it so. But what is far more sinister and dangerous is what the minimum competency advocates are doing, especially with regard to testing and test results--that is acting as if tests are an accurate and adequate means of predicting success and foisting this attitude off on others because they are in a power position

to do so. But acting as if it is so, to their chagrin, does not make it so.

The National Council of Teachers of English has promulgated a considerable number of very helpful statements for the members of the profession. I would like to cite just two dealing in particular with the competency issue. One is the background statement on legislatively mandated competency-based testing which reads:

Responsible educators recognize the need for standards in the language arts at all levels. Unfortunately, much legislatively mandated competency-based testing assumes that English language arts competencies can be defined, agreed upon by all those interested in education, and tested. In practice, competency-based testing overlooks alternative ways to determine students' growth and achievement. At this time few of the assumptions underlying competency-based education have been substantiated in practice, theory, or research.

The other is from the SLATE Starter Sheet, Vol. 2, No. 2, which lists potential problems the minimum competency testing movement raises. These include:

1. the possibility that scores on competency tests will determine promotion or non-promotion and thus will lead to a return to grade-repeating, a practice which disappeared from American schools after research pointed to its ill-effects on students and on schools;
2. the possibility that there will emerge diplomas of different 'classes' dependent on the student's scores on a test, with attendant danger of social stigmatism;
3. the possibility that statements of competence will lead to a circumscribing of the curriculum to a point where it will be merely preparing students for the test rather than educating them broadly;
4. the possibility that statements of competence will lead to didactic teaching as a shortcut to improving student performance, when research has indicated that such teaching is not as beneficial as more varied approaches to teaching;
5. the possibility that educational resources will be

concentrated upon those students who have trouble attaining the minimal level of competence, and will be diverted from the gifted and the broad range of students who can attain the minimal level fairly easily but need to go beyond it;

6. the possibility that educators and the public will be satisfied with bringing students to a minimum level of competency rather than to a level of mastery that is appropriate to their age, their view of themselves, and their aspirations;
7. the possibility that statements of competence and measures of competency will make schools less responsive to the cultural and linguistic diversity of this country.

Now I should be honest and admit that I have read documents that take a positive view of this movement, but relatively few, and if I were asked to pass on to you those good points I could subscribe to, I'm afraid I'd have to say I just don't find any. And as for those of you who have decided you will live with the minimal competency movement, I suspect you have reached this position by submitting to the notion that you will have to make the best of a bad situation--wait it out and it will go away. The problem with this kind of thinking is that it fails to realize the possibility that this movement may pave the way for others to follow that will even be worse. Nothing dies easily when people have put their professional and political identities and careers on the line to insure its success. One even senses at times a religious zealotry about the whole thing.

Inevitably the question comes up--where do we go from here--that seems to be a popular conference theme these days. I wish just once, the answer would be forward rather than around and around in the same old circles. As Marshall McLuhan has said,

"We look at the present through a rear view mirror," and the minimum competency movement is "rear-view mirrorism" at its worst.

Already the first evidence is coming in from around the country on competency programs, and it reflects generally the dismal picture I have painted so far. A good example is the State of Florida's Accountability Program and its now infamous Test of Functional Literacy. Mandated into law by the Florida State Legislature in 1976, less than one year later, an independent panel contracted by the Florida teaching profession (NEA) and the National Education Association and headed by Ralph Tyler, a senior consultant with Science Research Associates, published a report entitled The Florida Accountability Program: An Evaluation of Its Educational Soundness and Implementation.

In trying to present the sense of the report to you, I am violating two important principles of good writing to do so; one, I am quoting paragraphs out of the full context of the report, and two, I am using a considerable amount of the text so that the quotes are long. However, in my defense, I feel presenting them this way will give you, the reader, the maximum impact of the report, short of your reading the entire document for yourself.

In brief, the panel is critical of the strategy adopted for the implementation of the Accountability Act for two chief reasons. First, it failed to support the policy of school-based management adopted earlier by the Legislature; in fact, the strategy set back the implementation of the policy by operating the program from Tallahassee rather than decentralizing the effort.

The second reason for the panel's critical view of the strategy adopted is its failure to focus first on steps likely to bring about the greatest improvement of education in Florida.

As the panel listened to the testimony from parents and teachers and reviewed the steps taken thus far, several serious defects in implementation were identified. They appear to be largely the effects of rushing the establishment of the program without considering all the important aspects of it and without developing adequate communication with those chiefly affected by the program.

Evidence from testimony indicates that the generally used cut-off score of 70 percent for the demonstration of competency was subjectively derived. Since it is difficult, if not impossible, to defend any one percentage point as the point of mastery of such diverse exercises, it appears that the standard established for a diploma is quite arbitrary, and it was so viewed by some students and parents.

The panel also noted that the program was using a score and a single test as a basis for denying a regular high school diploma. This seemed to overlook the fact that students differ in their reactions to tests, some becoming tense and unable to express themselves under the usual test conditions. The accepted educational practice when making important educational decisions about a child is to obtain and consider evidence from several sources, including grades given by teachers who have had many hours of contact with the student.

Another common criticism of the eleventh-grade testing program is the overemphasis now given in many high schools to elementary reading, arithmetic, and some specific items in the tests to ensure that students can pass them. This has resulted in neglect of high school subjects such as science, history, literature, music, and the arts. Some of the teachers believed that the law now required them to narrow the curriculum to these minimum competencies at a time when they recognized that science, human understanding, good literature, art, and music are subjects of increasing importance. In fact, we were told that many teachers interpreted the emphasis on basic skills to mean that they must devote most of their attention to routine drill. This usually results in a decrease in the individual student's interest in schooling and it diminishes the time that should be devoted to teaching the meaning and application of these skills.

Perhaps the most emotion encountered by the panel during the hearings was that which focused on the failure of a large percentage of Black eleventh-graders on the Functional Literacy Test.

The panel considers these explanations as approaching the highest form of the unfortunate practice of "blaming the victim". If it was known by those responsible for the development and field-testing of the Functional Literacy Test that low socioeconomic status is highly correlated with low test performance, then why were the children who fall into this category exposed to an assessment experience known to be one on which they could not perform successfully? It appears as if the current class of eleventh-graders who are Black and poor were sacrificed for the purpose of rapid implementation of the functional literacy segment of the Accountability Act.

The critical issue is whether short-term remediation programs can be effective in providing to those poor Black children the knowledge and skills that the schools have not successfully imparted over the last eleven years.

The implementation of the Accountability Act should have taken into account the special problems of minority children and should have worked out a procedure for helping them learn more adequately before subjecting them to the humiliation of being labeled "functional illiterates."

The strategy adopted in the statewide Minimum Competency Testing Program, with its mandatory standards for receiving a regular high school diploma, is seriously faulty. It once more takes primary responsibility out of the hands of the local school when the Legislature has adopted a policy of moving toward school-based management. A strategy likely to be more effective in improving education in Florida would have helped schools to identify their particular problems and assisted each school in developing educational programs designed to attack serious problems of that school. Standards and requirements for promotion and graduation could then be developed based on reasonable expectations. Furthermore, an essential step for significant improvements in education in Florida is to reconstruct the eroding educational environment outside the school. Until the communities are aroused to do their part in the education of children and youth, many young people will fail to become constructive and responsible persons. Arousing the public to assume again the out-of-school educational responsibility should have been taken as an early step in the accountability program.⁴

⁴Ralph W. Tyler and others, "The Florida Accountability Program: An Evaluation of its Educational Soundness and Implementation," NEA (July 1978), 5-14.

I have been asked on occasion by teachers what they can do about the minimum competency movement and I'm afraid my answer is often somewhat unexpected and disappointing. I say fight it--resist it with all your might--intelligently, fairly, collectively--but fight it. When I think of all of the money and time and energy that has been expended so far to develop and implement this nonsense, not to mention the efforts to evaluate, critique and de-fuse and resist it, I can't help but think how all of that could have been directed to those kids in our classrooms who are supposed to be the beneficiaries of our efforts. As a matter of fact, I feel guilty having taken so much of your time and mine writing on this subject. We could have talked about the excitement of self-discovery inherent in writing, or the use of imagination in literature, or the vitality one finds in the study of a living/changing language. What is obvious from the Florida experience is that no one benefitted, and the unanticipated, unpleasant side effects may linger for a long long time. Indeed, Florida may be a microcosmic example of what the rest of the country is in store for. Once such grand plans are set in motion, stopping them is next to impossible. Perhaps more alarming are the other grand plans already looming on the horizon--spending lids, a nationalized curriculum, private schools to countervail the effects of forced busing, RIF'ing, to name a few.

I would like to end by again quoting Jim Meklenburger, primarily because I couldn't sum up the whole issue any better

myself, so why try. He says,

Of course, if one ignores the difficult questions and steamrolls ahead, it is feasible--even easy--to write or create tests and then administer schools in such a way that virtually all students pass virtually all the tests.

However feasible or easy it is to do minimum competency testing, the difficult task will be to defend doing it. It will be necessary to defend each test as an accurate measurement of whatever is tested; to defend that each tested item is a competency, a minimum competency, and is important enough to be worth both testing and teaching. It may be necessary, also, to demonstrate that the competency has been taught. It will be necessary to defend the role of the state (or school district) in requiring such tests, especially if the purpose is to judge students. Finally, it will be necessary, if the tests are used to judge students, to show that the tests do not discriminate in suspect ways. These are the legal challenges the use of minimum competency testing will provoke.

Using performance contracting as an all-too-similar example, is it not likely that, 10 years from now, we will remember minimum competency testing, if at all, as another short, demeaning, unlovely, ill-conceived chapter in American public education, another empty panacea with which (with the best of intentions) we created new problems and solved none?⁵

⁵Meklenburger, 699.